The Worst Boy in the School

M. J. A. McCAFFERY

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THE

WORST BOY IN THE SCHOOL.

BY

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WITH ILLUSTRATIONS
By GEORGE F. OF, Jr.

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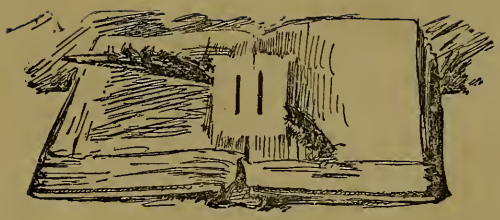
THE WORST BOY IN THE SCHOOL.

THE school-bell goes tolling with dull muffled boom,
As if mournfully timing a march to the tomb,
And our five hundred boys muster, each to his place,
With a questioning, wondering, fear-clouded face.

On the platform the principal, pondering, stands,
As in grief for some task his plain duty commands ;
And the teachers in silence are ranged down the aisles,
With looks from which sadness has borrowed the smiles.

All at once the bell ceases; is curbed every breath
Till the very air thrills with a hush as of death.



The principal's words are all quiet and low,
But startlingly sharp in their clear measured flow,
If, at first, his voice trembles, if, deep in his soul
Throbs a tingle of sorrow he could not control,
In a moment all traces of feeling withdraw,
As when calm Justice speaks the cold mandate of Law :

" My dear boys, if the grief and the gloom and dismay,
All the shame and the heart-ache I shrink from to-day,
Were a hundred-fold more, I would welcome them all,
Could they earn my escape from a sad duty's call ;
For to-day writes a record the first time to tell
That one of my boys from my school I expel.

Every means to reclaim this bold boy we have tried ;
Every means he has brazenly waived quite aside ;
Passed from teacher to teacher, from each one in turn
He has been but too prompt the bad title to earn
Of arch-plotter of mischief, high lord of misrule,
And, beyond all compare, *the worst boy in the school.*

But now, he must go from among us in shame,
Unworthy henceforth of all fellowship claim ;
And one or two others may well take to heart
The hint that to-day's warning lessons impart.
But my irksome task lingers ; now, Master James Grey,
Leave your books on your desk, please, and step down
this way."

A deeper hush thrills all our pulses the while
James, out from his classmates, comes down through
the aisle,
And stands at the platform, with low-drooping head,
And cheek that now pales, now flames guiltily red.
From the toss of the brown locks that arch o'er his brow
To the free swing of step—though it faltered but now—

A bright, winsome boy; in his figure and face
Shone unconsciously forth all a boy's careless grace,—
All the rich ruddy glow of the blood that careers
With the bound and the brightness and bloom of
twelve years.

He stands like a statue,—an image of shame,—
All still, save at times when a sigh heaves his frame,
And so wistfully hapless, so drearily sad,
That e'en as you looked, your heart yearned to the lad.

There was that, too, about him,—a touch,—trace,—a sign,—
A mere subtle something you could not define,—
There was something that told—in his trim—in his air—
That the outlaw of school might be home's pride and care,
That bright eyes and gentle might brim with dismay,
And a mother's heart ache for his plight of to-day;
And a great wave of pity surged o'er the whole school,
For the boys loved him well, spite his scorn of all rule;
And their thoughts went all loyally pleading his part,
With the love-tempered logic inspired from the heart:

School-rules were quite proper; but when was the time,
That, by code of the school-boy, to break them was crime?
Didn't every boy know, half the real fun of school
Consisted in breaking—or dodging—*some* rule?
And for sheer bliss and rapture, what triumph could match
The breaking them *all*—if you could—in one batch?

That James cared for rules was not always quite clear;
But then, in the match or game, where was his peer?
Whose foot was the fleetest, the foremost whose arm,
Whose keenest the eye when the contest waxed warm?
And if mishap befel in the sport or the fray
Where the mimic foes battled for mastery's sway,

Whose superb feats of skill had, a hundred times o'er,
Wrested instant defeat into triumph once more?
If, perhaps, into scrapes he might, now and then, lead,
Who less shirked the blame of each madcap misdeed,
To shoulder alone all the brunt of the wrong
That to others, perchance, might as justly belong?

Who ?—Who but James Grey,—the staunch, loyal and
true,—
Open-handed, free-hearted, and brave through and
through !
Doubtless James had his faults, (there are spots on the
sun,)
But his merits outcounted them all ten to one ;
And merits like his might well save him from brand,
Though he broke all the rules of all schools in the land.

Thoughts, something like these, trouble every boy
there,
As James, sick at heart, waits his doom in despair.

O'er the face of the teacher trail shadows of pain,
As, lance-like, his words cleave the silence again :
" Master Grey, is there nothing that yet may be told,
To induce me this shame, this disgrace, to withhold ?
Is there naught you can say that may plead for reprieve ?
Naught to crave for you now a last chance to retrieve ?
What ! boy !—not a word ? Tell me something ! E'en
yet
My heart longs to spare you this humbling regret."

Deep and swift o'er the boy's cheek the crimson tints
flash,
And he quails from the shame as from stroke of a lash.
All dazed and bewildered he steals up askance
To the face of the teacher a shy, pleading glance,
And, as if in response,—but his tongue mutely trips
With a whirl of thoughts rushing to speech on his lips.

Twice—and thrice—and again,—his lips tremble to speak,

When a long treble wail, half a sob, half a shriek,—

Where the little boys sat at the end of the hall,—

Rises wild through the silence and startles us all;

And a small tiny form flits the long aisle adown,

Till by side of James Grey stands his friend, Georgy Bowne.

With his head on Grey's shoulder, and arm round his neck,

In a passion of tears that no effort might check,—

His tones in wild protest the school-room wail through,

And his heart-broken accents moan, "Oh, Jimmy! You?"

We all knew George Bowne—knew him, e'en at his best,
As a bold, graceless, angel-faced imp of unrest,—
As that marvel, that riddle, that torment and joy,—
A thorough-paced, natural, glorious boy.
We thought we knew, too, his original ways,—
But this prank outcapped all his feats of amaze;

And we waited, in fast fearful tension of thought,
What next of surprise or of dread might be wrought ;
For a cold, cloudy look, that but boded scant grace
To George and his ways, swept the principal's face.
And though George noted, too, the fast-gathering storm,
Never once paled his cheek, never once blenched his form.

In sooth, 'twould take more than a principal's frown
To daunt the bold front or glib tongue of George Bowne,
Or shake from its poise the cool easy control
That swayed every power of his cute little soul.

The once pink and white of his face, neck and hand,
To a swart Arab brown, sun and weather had tanned,
But touched not the tints that yet lurk, flaxen-fair,
In his clustering tangles of thick glossy hair.

And no grime of tears could efface or disguise
The beauty and charm of his great lustrous eyes,
That all guileless and limpid and innocent seem
As the fancies that dimple a babe's smiling dream.
But beware ! As you gazed in their clear crystal blue—
While he just as coolly looked you keenly through,

And—to baffle your quest or your favor to win—
Reeled off pretty yarns, fast as fancy could spin,
With a deft artful artlessness speciously wrought,
That to Cicero's self deeper craft might have taught—
It was then, only then, you could—ruefully—tell
What was meant by the adage, "Truth *lies* in a well."
Did you seek from George clue to some far-reaching
wile,
Did you tax him with guilt of some deep-plotted guile,
With what skill he would parry each questioning thrust;
Now with charming and sweetly-confiding—distrust;
Now with swift congelation of manner and tone
That would freeze all inquiry as dumb as a stone;

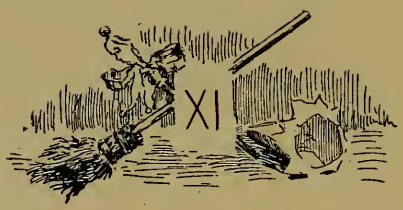
Or with bluff rugged frankness that scorned to conceal
Aught—except just the secret you bade him reveal ;
Or surprise, that you could ever—What ! Suspect *him?*
And with gentle reproach would his eyes fairly swim,
Till you quite more than half felt ashamed of yourself
To misdoubt such a good, honest, shy little elf ;
And then, ere you knew it, you found, with a start,
The shrewd, laughing varlet entrenched in your heart,

With free scope to devise newer plans of campaign,
And full license to tease and torment you again.

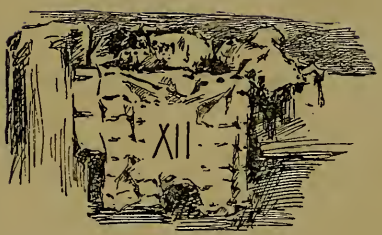
Than those twain, as they stood, never picture more quaint
Might an Angelo plan or a Raphael paint,—
Never vision more strange, more pathetic, more droll,
Floated dream-tints of wonder o'er rapt artist soul:

James,—all passive in stately and stony despair ;
George,—all ruffling with knight-errant, high-crested
air—

With such scorn dashing back both his tears and his
curls,
(Tears he always had deemed a mere weakness of girls)
And so swelling with zeal his friend's sentence to stay,
That he looked almost big—even grand—in his way.



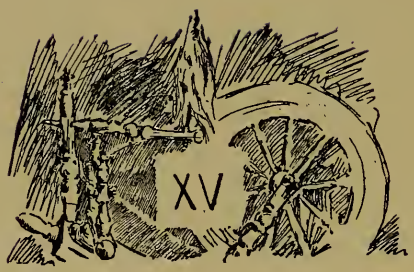
But the storm gathers dark on the principal's brow ;
In his voice never tingled tones sterner than now ;
" How dare you, George Bowne ! This wild whim, this
mad freak
Makes sport of all patience—what mean you, sir ?
Speak !"



" No, no, teacher, no !—'tain't no freak, nor no whim,
Nor nothing like that—but—you *can't* expel Jim !
Why, Jim saved my life at the risk of his own
When the rest of the fellows would all let me
drown——"

"What! boy! Saved your life? Let you drown?
How, when, where?"
Gasped the principal, startled, as if then and there
A dread bolt of lightning had crashed at his feet,
And, for one awful moment, stilled every heart-beat.

The teacher sat down : beckoned George to his knee :
" Now, George—if you can—plain and straight-forward
be !
They may, perchance, something your friend here avail,
The facts—the real facts—of this wonderful tale
Of drowning and saving and what not : be true,
And briefly tell all that befel James and you."



"Yes, teacher, I'll give it you straight as a gun—
No flummery guff and no rainbow fakes—none!
'Twas last week when you caught us,—you know,—me
and Jim,
Playing hookey from school; we were hardly in trim
To be stuck much on class-work that beautiful day
When all out of doors lured to pleasure and play.

And the Park was just lovely ; the buds and the blooms
Of May and June blended their richest perfumes ;
The merry birds sported through covert and brake,
And trails of song circled and twined in their wake ;
The clover-starred meadows spread broad as a sea
For the plundering quest of the buccaneer bee ;

The tall stately trees in their long columned files
Spanned with high, graceful arches the wide woodland
aisles ;
Over all, grandly rounded the blue dome on high,
The cloudless and measureless calm of a sky
Of a perfect June day, when all earth was so bright
That even to live was itself a delight.

Oh ! teacher, forgive, if we recked not of school,
As we roved, happy boys, where the shadows lay cool,
Or basked in the sunshine, by lake, lawn and bower,
And enjoyed every charm of each fast-fleeting hour.

All we saw, all we did, were too long now to tell,—
And perhaps the recital would scarce please you well:
Enough, that the long summer-day was far spent,
When our steps to the river we randomly bent,
To a curve of the shore and a bright pretty bay,

Where the sunny waves sparkled and leaped in their play.

There a round score of swimmers, loud-shouting their glee,

Gave a right merry welcome to Jimmy and me ;

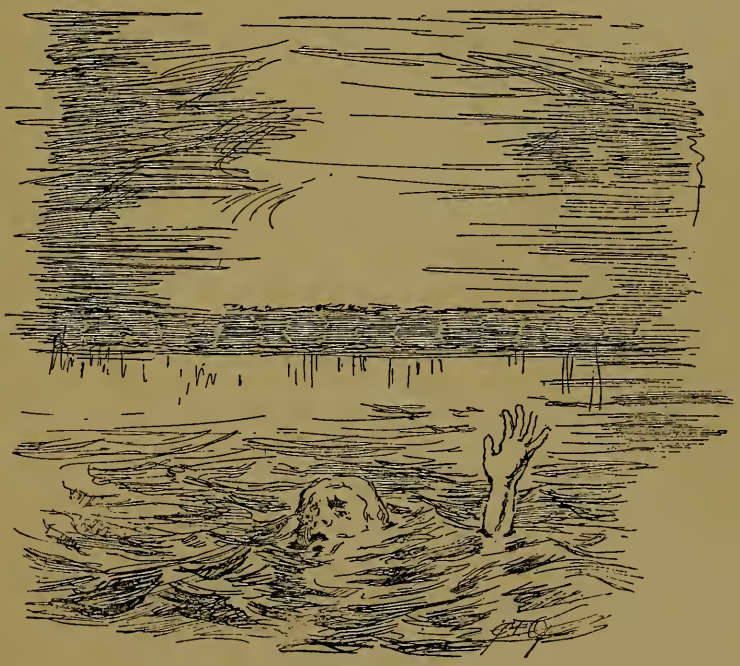
And we, nothing loth, had soon plunged in the wave,

Playing leap-frog and cross-tag and follow-the-brave ;

And we dived, and we raced, and worked stunts of all
sorts,—
For our presence but seemed to add zest to the sports,—
Until Jim—he can swim like a fish—set the pace,
As his cool dauntless skill won his right to first place.

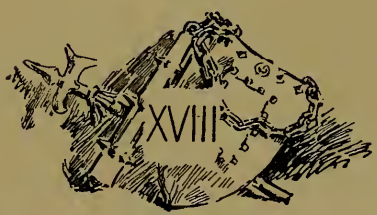
Our revels had swung to their very top-bent,—
There was no hint of danger, no thought of lament,—

When a sharp, sudden cramp, shooting lightnings of pain,
Seemed to double me up, shriveled sinew and brain,
Till I swayed to each wave idly lapping me o'er,
Like a rift of mere wreck-weed storm-flung from the shore.
At that instant, a swirl of the fast-running tide
Caught me full in its power—swept me helpless aside—



Dragged, swallowed me down to the black slimy bed,
To the dim-looming shapes that glare spectral and
dread,
And the—ugh! o'er me yet what a chill horror creeps
Of the cold crawling things that brood down in the
deeps!

Down I went,—twice,—and thrice ; there was no one
near by
To help me, or heed me, or e'en hear my cry,—
My last gurgling cry as the waves clutched their prey,—
A wild agonized cry upon God—and Jim Grey!



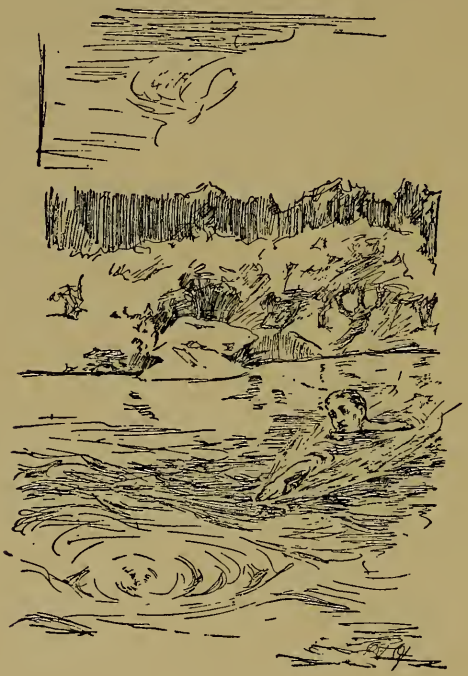
And surely God heard. Only His grace and power
Could have sent to my aid in that dark, dreadful hour.

His bounty I gratefully bless and adore;
Be glory and praise to His name evermore!"
Here the boy, with bowed head, spoke in low softened tone,
Paused a moment in silence, then bravely went on:

"The next I remember, I lay on the bank,
On a green shady knoll where the verdure grew rank,

And around me the fellows were grouped, all alert,
All tireless, all eager my fate to avert.
They had fled from my need; but I blame not their
flight,
For they all lost their heads in wild panic and fright.
They had slunk back ashamed; when they plied me,
be sure,
With every known treatment that hinted at cure.

And their nursing, if rude, was effective ; for soon,
They had rallied me back from my pallid death-swoon—
Fanned the flickering spark of my life till it glowed,—
Turned the ebb-tides of health to set full on the flood ;



Then they told me how James, learning my hapless lot,
Had, with strokes fast and fearless, made straight for
the spot

Where I had gone down ; how again and again,
He had dived for me, groping afar,—all in vain ;
At last, how he came, panting, crippled, distressed,
With one arm around me supine on his breast,
Floating toilsomely, wearily, ne'er giving o'er,
Till, himself blown and spent, he brought me to the shore."

As that brave tale is told, how the boys envy James!
In their quick teeming fancies what grand purpose
flames!
Every bright-glowing impulse of chivalry there
Seems to blazon with splendor that glorified air!
There mighty thoughts stir, that shall nevermore sleep
Till to knightliest deeds of proud daring they leap,—

Till the will that makes heroes to ecstasy starts
All the strange mystic longings of brave boyish hearts.

XXI

But our rapture was wrought to a higher pitch still,—
O'er our souls swept a keener, more exquisite thrill,

When staunch little George, quite unconsciously grand,
To the wondering teacher thus affably planned;
"Please, teacher, don't make an example of Jim!
If example you *must* have, take *me* and spare him!
Let me now for my friend—such a friend—shield the
fame,
Who so grandly that day proved his right to the name.
And—Jim's got a mother; 'twould blight all her joy,
And her kind heart would break, if shame came to her
boy.
So, as I have no mother, and no one to care,—
No, no one so much as to ask how I fare,—
Please, teacher, take me, and then——"

"Stop, child!—no more!"

And the teacher spoke gently as never before;

But his heart to his throat leaped with one mighty throb

That made his voice sound like a half-stifled sob;

And his head bowed in revrey low on his breast,

While with vague awe and wonder his musings confessed,—

How often life gropes in the shades of the vale,

How oft bravest striving seems doomed but to fail,

Yet these boys, almost babes,—both, at one easy bound,

Leap to heights of heroic achievement fame-crowned,

Win to far peaks of lofty deserving that shine
With a ray, with a halo of glory divine.
Then kindly and warmly there stirred at his heart
A feeling of pride that not yet could he part

His two hardened culprits, his glorious pair,
Who had risked life for life, who would shame for shame
dare;
But he only said,—
"George, let me shake hands with you!
You're a brave little man, to your friend staunch and
true.
And, James! to my heart! You're a hero, my boy!
You should be, you must be, our pride and our joy.
I know not which more, you or George, to admire,—
Your gallant deed done or his unwrought desire.
And now, for you both, I declare and proclaim
Wholly cancelled each record of trespass and blame;

I restore your good standing to rate with the best ;
How you thank me, your conduct shall henceforth attest.
Count me surely your friend while yourselves shall be true ;
Let my friendship deserve noble things from you two,—
That hereafter, you be, not the chiefs of misrule,
But exemplars and patterns for all in the school."

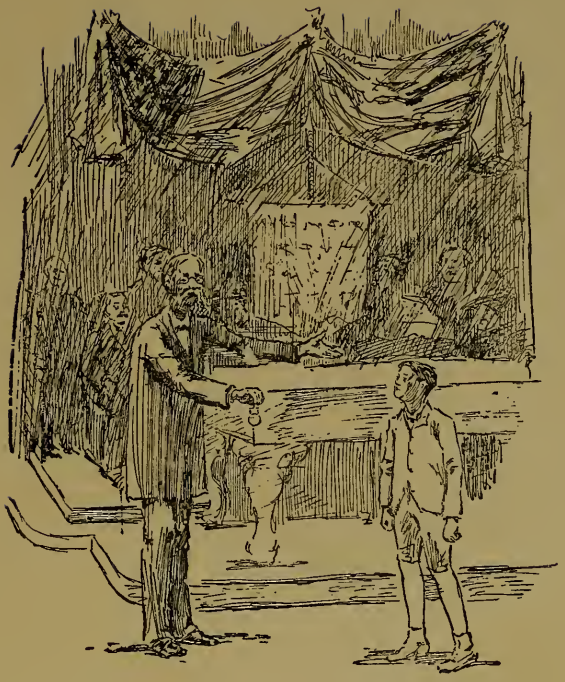
Then school was dismissed; but the boys lingered long
Here and there through the playground in flushed eager throng,

And listened, and questioned, as only boys can,
Till again James and George o'er the brave story ran,—
Till, again and again, the details were told o'er
Of that marvellous day by the broad Hudson's shore.

A twelvemonth rolls by,—fast apace speeds the time
In the heyday and gladness of youth's careless prime,—

And again goes the school-bell ; what joy in its call,
As its message and greeting ring through the great hall!
While our boys to their places in soldierly files
(How proudly they march !) muster down through the aisles.
Their parents and friends are all gathering there,
And the whole school puts on a bright festival air.
Then with pleased entertainment the hours glide along
Amid music and mirth, recitation and song,
Till the principal reads from a ribbon-decked scroll
The names of the boys on our school's honor-roll ;

And mid plaudits and cheers he calls up one by one
Those who merited best in the year that is gone.
But the plaudits and cheers seem the rest to surpass,
When he calls out "*George Bowne, the best boy in his class;*"
And applause and acclaim swell in generous shout,
As the teacher a broad golden medal holds out,
And says, with a joy that the teachers all share,
With a tone of pride tingling and thrilling the air,



'*For good conduct, hard study, observance of rule,*
This prize to JAMES GREY, THE BEST BOY IN THE SCHOOL."

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